

# BLOWING OUT THE BOY'S BRAINS 21

BY FRANKLIN K. MATHIEWS

CHIEF SCOUT LIBRARIAN, BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA

"**W**HAT 1,500 School Children Did between Friday and the Following Monday" and "The Hobbies of 933 Boys" were the captions of two charts that attracted universal attention at the Rochester, New York, Child Welfare Exhibit recently held. In both cases reading claimed the largest percentage of time. That is most gratifying; but it must be understood that practically in all surveys of children's reading made by librarians and teachers almost without exception the unwelcome fact is disclosed that the books of the "underground library" are as influential as those circulated by public means.

Happily, though, the volumes of the dime or the nickel novel are fast disappearing from this private circulating exchange. Through the good influences of the public libraries and schools and the successful competition of the "movies" the "yellow-back" is being hard hit. But, alas! the modern "penny dreadful" has not been banished quite so completely as at first appears. Its latest appearance is in the disguise of the bound book, and sometimes so attractively bound that it takes its place on the retail book-store shelf alongside the best juvenile publications.

In making a survey of children's reading in a certain Southern city recently, in the very best book-store I found the famous Frank Merriwell nickel novel series bound in cloth and selling for fifty cents. And I happen to know that the author of this series, under another name, is writing other books for the same publishing house. The fact of the business is that the passing of the half-dime novel has meant lean times for the authors of this type of reading. I have it upon very good authority that the circulation of the leading nickel novel has been reduced from 200,000 to 50,000 a week. Consequently these writers must find a new market for their output; and this is supplied for the most part by some of those publishers whose books are written by authors whose motives and methods are similar to those of the original producers of slot-machine juveniles.

The public will, I am sure, be interested in knowing just how most of the books that

sell from twenty-five to fifty cents are, not written, but manufactured. There is usually one man who is as resourceful as a Balzac so far as ideas and plots for stories are concerned. He cannot, though, develop them all, so he employs a number of men who write for him. I know of one man who has a contract to furnish his publisher each year with twenty-five books manufactured in this way. Another author manufactured last year more than fifty. By such methods from year to year the popular-priced series are kept going, the manager of the writing syndicate being able to furnish the publisher upon demand any kind of a story that may be needed.

In almost all of this "mile-a-minute fiction" some inflammable tale of improbable adventure is told. Boys move about in aeroplanes as easily as though on bicycles; criminals are captured by them with a facility that matches the ability of Sherlock Holmes; and when it comes to getting on in the world, the cleverness of these hustling boys is comparable only to those captains of industry and Napoleons of finance who have made millions in a minute. Insuperable difficulties and crushing circumstances are as easily overcome and conquered as in fairy tales. Indeed, no popular character of history or legend or mythological story was ever more wise, more brave, more resourceful, than some of these up-to-the-minute boy heroes are made to appear in the Sunday supplement juvenile stories.

I have just been reading a book of this type in which the captain of a new submarine craft is represented to be a boy of sixteen; "though so young, he had," so the author says, "after a stern apprenticeship, actually succeeded in making himself a world-known expert in the handling of submarine torpedo-boats." Continuing, we are told that with this brilliant young genius there are two other sixteen-year old boys, and it is (here I quote from the book) "rumored, and nearly as often believed, that these three sea-bred young Americans know as much as any one in the United States on the special subject of submarine boat building." In a previous volume of the series, "these three young friends secured the prize medal at Annapolis, where for a brief



time they served as instructors in submarine work to the young midshipmen at the Naval Academy."

"Never mind how big a rascal he may be,  
Every fellow is another entity!  
There's a good man and a bad,  
Both a sane man and a mad,  
In 'most every human being that we see."

I will leave my readers to decide whether it was "a good man" or "a bad," "a sane man" or "a mad," who wrote the book from which I have taken these extracts.

Because these cheap books do not develop criminals or lead boys, except very occasionally, to seek the Wild West, parents who buy such books think they do their boys no harm. The fact is, however, that the harm done is simply incalculable. I wish I could label each one of these books: "Explosives! Guaranteed to Blow Your Boy's Brains Out."

One of the most valuable assets a boy has is his imagination. In proportion as this is nurtured a boy develops initiative and resourcefulness. The greatest possible service that education can render is to train the boy to grasp and master new situations as they constantly present themselves to him; and what helps more to make such adjustment than a lively imagination? Story books of the right sort stimulate and conserve this noble faculty, while those of the viler and cheaper sort, by overstimulation, debauch and vitiate, as brain and body are debauched and destroyed by strong drink.

If you take gasoline and feed it to an automobile a drop at a time, you get splendid results, because you have confined and directed it with intelligent care and caution. Take the same quantity of gasoline and just pour it out and you either don't get anywhere or you get somewhere you don't care to go. Here is an apt illustration of the proper use of the elements that must enter in to make good books for boys. For, let it be understood, the good book for the average boy must be one that, as the "Century Magazine" says, is "wholesomely perilous." And what is meant is this: the red-blooded boy, the boy in his early teens, must have his thrill; he craves excitement, has a passion for action, "something must be doing" all the time; and in nothing is this more true than in his reading.

The difference between a "Treasure Island" and a modern "thriller" in its many editions is not a difference in the elements so much as the use each author makes

of them. A Stevenson works with combustibles, but, as in the case of using the gasoline, he confines them, directs them with care and caution, always thinking of how he may use them in a way that will be of advantage to the boy. In the case of the modern "thriller" the author works with the same materials, but with no moral purpose, with no real intelligence. No effort is made to confine or direct or control these highly explosive elements. The result is that, as some boys read such books, their imaginations are literally "blown out," and they go into life as terribly crippled as though by some material explosion they had lost a hand or foot. For not only will the boy be greatly handicapped in business, but the whole world of art in its every form almost is closed to him. Why are there so few men readers of the really good books, or even of the passing novels, sometimes of real worth? Largely, I think, because the imagination of so many men as boys received such brutal treatment at the hands of those authors and publishers who give no concern as to what they write or publish so long as it returns constantly the expected financial gain.

The natural thing would be for me to tell you the titles of these books. Space will not permit. It would take pages to give the titles even of those that have been published in the last three months, which, with scores of others, will make up the annual supply for the holiday season, when these books are sold by the million. And the very fact that so many are used for Christmas gifts makes all our children liable to this pernicious influence. Indeed, at that time tens of thousands of them will be distributed through Sunday-schools at the annual children's Christmas festival, and it is very possible that you will yourself purchase them for your own children, since they are on sale everywhere, even many of the denominational publishing houses listing them in their catalogues.

How shall we find a way out? It cannot be said too emphatically that, if supervision be given, it is comparatively easy to win children from any form of these sensational books. Boys read these books because they have in them just those elements that appeal so much to boys. But that is not to say that boys will not read better and the best books.

I discovered a striking instance of this as told by a bookseller in South Carolina. I found in his store a table of nickel novels.



He said that the sale of these had in the last few months fallen off ninety-five per cent, and he also told me, with considerable pleasure, the cause. The sale of the modern "penny dreadful" had been made among the mill boys of his town, but recently the mill-owner had engaged a Young Men's Christian Association secretary to work among his boy employees. This welfare worker, recognizing the worth of boys' reading, has promoted a system of traveling libraries through the several mills, with the result that the nickel novel has become a thing of the past. And it is always so. A multitude of as successful experiences might be cited.

What about the bookseller, then? I would answer with confidence that the average bookseller is not disposed to promote the sale of pernicious or wicked books. In a number of instances booksellers have told me that they would remove from their stock any book I thought objectionable. Not long ago the manager of the book section of a department store in a New England town read an article condemning cheap and poor children's books. He realized that it was exactly the kind of books that he was selling mostly. Through a friend he sent some of these books to the local children's librarian, whose report, of course, confirmed his fear that they were not wholesome. Since then he has not pushed so hard the sales of such books, and has paid more attention to the better books for children.

So we must look further, but not far—only to the other side of the counter. The chief reason why so many of these trashy books are circulated through the retail trade is be-

cause they are so cheap. The "weakness" is not with the boy's taste, but with the parent's pocketbook; the fault lies not so much behind the counter as in front of it. But help is near to meet this weakness and correct this fault. Many of the reputable publishers are placing in competition with the trashy books reprint editions of some of their very best juveniles, all of them written by those modern authors whose books are so popular with all boys. These retail for fifty cents. Printed from the original plates, they are in every way practically equal to the editions which sold on first publication at prices ranging from one dollar to one dollar and fifty cents. So widely have these reprint books been distributed through the retail trade that they may be found wherever books are sold.

Just as I am closing this article there comes to my desk a letter from a scoutmaster in Lansing, Michigan. To the letter a postal card is attached signed by the sheriff stating that "information is wanted relative to the whereabouts of Guy Arthur Phinisey, who left his home in Lansing, Michigan, on September 2, 1914," etc. In the letter of the scoutmaster I find these significant words: "From the information I have received there seems to be no reason for his leaving home of his own accord. He has a good home, and his parents seem quiet but thrifty. The only possible clue I can find is 'cheap reading.'"

Of course not every boy who indulges himself in "cheap reading" will be so affected, but who of us is wise enough to know which one it is that will be so influenced?

## **SAFETY FIRST!**

[An admirable way for the "Safety First" idea to express itself would be for all welfare workers to see to it that boys read only such books as are safe for them to read. The Christmas season is approaching when boys, in the form of gift books, will be deluged with the nickel novel in disguise. The price appeals and at this time these books are circulated by the hundreds of thousands. Leaders of Women's Clubs, Parent-Teacher Associations, The Women's Christian Temperance Union, etc., would render a very vital service in having this article read at the next regular meeting of their organizations. Ministers, Public School Teachers, Librarians, Y.M.C.A. Secretaries, Scoutmasters, might also help by having the substance of this article published in their local paper.]



# EVERY BOY'S LIBRARY

## BOY SCOUT EDITION

A GUARANTEED library for boys; clean, wholesome, vigorous stories that have been endorsed by a Commission of the leading librarians of America. Every boy will want these books, and every parent should see that he gets them.

Price 50c per volume, net. By mail, 10c extra. For sale wherever books are sold.

### NEW BOOKS FOR 1914

**Animal Heroes** By Ernest Thompson Seton

Being the histories of a Cat, a Dog, a Pigeon, a Lynx, two Wolves and a Reindeer and in the elucidation of the same over 200 drawings.

**Hand Book for Boys: Revised Edition**

Boy Scouts of America  
Explains what Boy Scouts do. Describes Scoutcraft, Woodcraft, Camping, outdoor and indoor games, etc., and tells all about scout uniforms and badges.

**For the Honor of the School** By Ralph Henry Barbour This is an inspiring story of life in Hilton Academy, for boys, full of exciting athletics and good clean sports.

**Along the Mohawk Trail**

By Percy K. Fitzhugh

This story recounts the adventures of boy scout patrols around Lake Champlain.

**Boat-building and Boating** By Dan C. Beard

All that Dan Beard knows and has written about the building of every simple kind of a boat, from a raft to a cheap motor-boat, is brought together in this book.

### PREVIOUSLY ISSUED

**Baby Elton, Quarter-Back** By Leslie W. Quirk  
A story of college life.

**The Blazed Trail** By Stewart Edward White  
A story of a young man who blazed his way to fortune through the heart of the Michigan pines.

**The Call of the Wild** By Jack London  
A vivid story of life in the Klondike regions.

**Cab and Caboose** By Kirk Monroe  
A vivid story of railroad life.

**College Years** By Ralph D. Paine  
Wholesome stories of life at Yale.

**Crooked Trails** By Frederic Remington  
A collection of ten stories—laid along the border line between Texas and Mexico.

**Cattle Ranch to College** By Russell Doubleday  
A true story of the life of a boy in the far West ten years ago.

**Buccaneers and Pirates of our Coast** By Frank R. Stockton  
An account of the offshoots of the early English, French and Dutch combinations against Spanish exactions.

**The Horsemen of the Plains** By J.A. Altsheler  
A story of scouts and trappers.

**Jeb Hutton** By James B. Connolly  
The story of a Georgia boy brought up on the banks of the Savannah River.

**The Jester of St. Timothy's** By Arthur Stanwood Pier  
The story of a young master just out of college.

**A Midshipman in the Pacific** By Cyrus Townsend Brady  
A story of Midshipman Martin Fuller, U.S.N., and his adventures in a whaler, trader and frigate.

**Pitching in a Pinch** By Christy Mathewson  
A series of gripping stories of the Big Leaguers, told by "Matty", the star pitcher of the New York Giants.

**The Rancho on the Oxhide** By Henry Inman  
A story of pioneer life in Kansas in the late sixties.

**Redney McGaw** By Arthur E. McFarlane  
A vivid story of circus life.

**Three Years Behind the Guns** By Lieu Tisdale  
"The true chronicles of a 'diddy box'" set down by a boy who ran away to sea.

**Tom Paulding** By Brander Matthews  
A story of buried treasure in New York, dealing with Revolutionary History.

**Tommy Remington's Battle** By Burton E. Stevenson  
The story of a coal-miner's son's fight for an education.

**Jim Davis** By John Masefield  
A story of the English-French war, and of a boy who became involved with smugglers on the Devon Coast.

**Tecumseh's Young Braves** By Everett T. Tomlinson  
The story of three young Indians during the war of 1812.

**Tom Strong, Washington's Scout** By Alfred Bishop Mason  
The adventures of a boy and a trapper during the Revolution.

**Wells Brothers: The Young Cattle Kings** By Andy Adams  
How two American boys started a cattle ranch and went through exciting experiences of cow-punching.

**Yankee Ships and Yankee Sailors** By James Barnes  
Tales of 1812, dealing with the gallant defenders of vessels like the Chesapeake, grand Old Ironsides, etc.

**The Cruise of the Cachalot** By Frank T. Bullen  
A thrilling story of a whaling expedition and adventures in the high seas.

**Treasure Island** By Robert Louis Stevenson  
A story of Pirates and the Spanish Main—the best story of hidden treasure ever written.